

Munin Bhuyan's *Hati aru Fandi*: A Discussion

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Abstract:

As a playwright, Munin Bhuyan is a well-known name in the world of Assamese drama. Munin Bhuyan made his debut as a writer during his University days in the weekly journal called "Saptahik Nilachal", the editor of which was Homen Borgohain. With that he began writing a number of articles on dramas, edited a magazine titled *Mahekiya Kobita* and composed a number of plays, wrote a number of short stories and translated two short documentaries after joining the Akashvani Dibrugarh Centre. Along with writing and directing plays, he was also involved in acting. In addition to the 11 dramas of different genres, he wrote a collection of three dramas, "Paraja", which was highly acclaimed among the drama lovers. In 1986, he was awarded the Akashvani Best Playwright Award for his play *Hati Aru Fandi* and the Assam Sahitya Sabha's Best Literary Award for *Jorowrowa Paraja*. One of the salient features of Munin Bhuyan's plays is the progressive social thought expressed in his plays. He was also associated with the Assam branch of the Bharatiya Ganantya Sangha, a cultural organization of the Indian Left Party. Therefore, his plays and other writings reflect the class struggle, the voice of protest against exploitation and the humility of the lesser privileged world. In addition to these, his plays are special for various dramatic action-techniques. This research paper is based on a holistic view of what aspects of the above discussed issues are revealed in his play *Hati aru Fandi* or "Elephant and Trap".

Keywords: Drama, Playwright, Elephant, Fandi (Trap), Muhiram, Mahajan.

Introduction to the Playwright:

Munin Bhuyan has a distinct identity in the Assamese drama world as a playwright and director. All three of his plays, published in print, are accessible to the readers, although he also wrote a number of plays for the radio, Akashvani Dibrugarh Centre. These three plays compiled by the author under the name of *Paraja* bear the testimony of his theatrical prowess. Munin Bhuyan was born on July 26, 1948 in the village of Nakari in the city of North Lakhimpur. His father was Ram Mohan Bhuyan and his mother was Kanaklata Bhuyan. Bhuyan passed the entrance examination from Lakhimpur Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School and enrolled in Cotton College and completed his undergraduate studies in the science stream from Cotton College in 1973. In the year 1976, he completed his postgraduate studies from Gauhati University, Guwahati and began his career as a manuscript writer at the Akashvani Dibrugarh Centre in the same year. He was later appointed as the director of the Centre. From the very beginning he was involved in the regular production of plays at the Centre and was successful in leading the Centre through play writing, directing and acting. The fact that Bhuyan's name is closely associated with almost twenty all-India award-winning programs produced by the Centre is a testament to his prowess.

A collection of three full-length plays by Munin Bhuyan was published by the name *Paraja* in the year 2000. The book was published by a drama organization called "Nabik" in North Lakhimpur. The compilation includes his three plays - *Hati aru Fandi*, *Jorowrowa Paraja* and *Sandhikshyan*. The play is a proper combination of social awareness and social responsibility with creative, dramatic art and technique. Apart from *Paraja*, the North Lakhimpur Sahitya Sabha has published eleven plays in different genres written by Muneen Bhuyan, which are as follows - (1) *Free Advice*, (2) *Alohi-1*, (3) *Alohi-2*, (4) *Alohi-3*, (5) *Grihakandal*, (6) *Grihakandal-2*, (6) *Bharaghar*, (6) *Sokh*, (9) *Aprilfool-1*, (10) *Aprilfool 2*, and (11) *Ofarajeng*.

Most of the plays by Munin Bhuyan are readable as literature and are also suitable as stage plays. Innovation has been demonstrated through these plays in various genres such as drama, dialogue, drama-directing, managements and so on. Bhuyan has received several awards in recognition of his works. These include the Akashvani Annual Prize for Children's Drama Competition, the Best Drama Director's Award at the University of Guwahati in 1972-73, the Akashvani Best Playwright Award for the best playwright in the 1978 edition of *Hati aru Fandi*, the Assam Sahitya Sabha Best Playwright Award for *Jorowrowa Paraja* etc.

Munin Bhuyan wrote in the playwright's column, '*Paraja*', that he spent years and years contemplating and compiling materials for the anthology. After the play *Sandhikshyan*, he completed the preliminary work of the play, although it was not completed due to various reasons. On September 9, 2004, at the very young age of 57, this very responsible and studious dramatist and playwright left this world leaving behind many his works in an incomplete state and also, hereby ending the tradition of sensible plays.

Methodology : In this research paper, descriptive and as-needed analytical methods have been used.

Objectives : The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of Munin Bhuyan's play "*Hati aru Fandi*" in the history of Assamese drama literature. At the same time, this study will also help to give some clues about the relevance of the study of this play.

Background of the play:

The play *Hati aru Fandi* was written by the playwright for the radio. By winning the first place in the All India Radio Drama Competition, it was able to attract the attention of all Indian playwrights by translating it into almost all the major languages of India. The play was staged for the first time in September 1986 at the initiative of "Natyacharcha" artists in Dibrugarh. The play has since been staged on various stages in Guwahati and other places of Assam. Based on the real and tragic story of the lives of the Fandi or elephant catchers, the drama has really exposed the nature of the exploitation done to the ordinary working class people in the modern age. The playwright himself went to the elephant groves of Upper Assam and got the necessary material for the play by understanding the works, conversations between elephant catchers, Lahatiya and the owners of these elephant businesses. He met and interviewed the elephant masters and catchers of different places and studied the various aspects of their knowledge of elephants, their intimate relationship with that knowledge, the dangers associated with their jobs along with the different aspects of their life. The important thing is that he was not confined to informational studies only and could actually understand the inherent exploitation under these practices by visiting these places himself.

The language used in the play *Hati aru Fandi* gives the idea that this play is set in the rural areas of Upper Assam where the vocations involving with elephant catching or trading are the main sources of livelihood for the people. Elephants had a very high status in the society portrayed in the drama. It is understood from the dialogues in the play that the demand for elephant catching was higher than that of agriculture. The reason behind this was that many farmers who had lands were not able to pay the land tax which is why they had to mortgage the land to the moneylenders. Owing to this, a large percentage of their agricultural produce had to be given away to the moneylenders. In addition to this, the farmers never received the expected produce from their fields. Apart from farming, other professions that paid these people well were associated with catching elephants. The playwright has tried to expose the exploitative nature of the rulers or the moneylenders by taking this particular society as the play's background.

The Plot of the Drama:

The main idea of the play *Hati aru Fandi* is the conflict between the exploitative natured, rich elephant traders over the working class, especially the elephant catchers. The main theme of the play is based on the symbolism of the exploitation done by the working class people over the ages. The protagonist of the play Muhiram is a very ordinary man. He is an expert and experienced in elephant catching. Muhiram's ancestors were also involved in the vocation of elephant catching. Like Muhiram, his father also worked as a Fandi or elephant catcher in Mahajan's (moneylender) house. In this way, generations after generations of Muhiram's family, has done a huge contribution to the reputation of the moneylenders, but their own financial woes have never ended. The moneylender makes a lot of money every year by taking advantage of Muhairam's expertise in elephant catching. Pomi, Muhiram's wife, can look through the Mahajan's cunning intentions and she tries to keep Muhiram away from these rich moneylenders. According to Pomi's advice, Muhiram also stayed away from elephant catching for two years. Without Muhiram, the moneylender also suffered some losses in the elephant trade. Later, however, the moneylender tricks Muhiram into working for him again with fake promises. Trapped in his words, Muhiram does not pay any heed to his wife's advice and sets off to trap elephants for his employer and is even successful in trapping a few elephants. Afterwards, the greedy Mahajan, not satisfied with the few elephants, extended the term of the permit for 15 days and sent Muhiram back to the forest catch more elephants. There, Muhiram loses his life being stumped by some wild elephants. Muhiram's death leaves his pregnant wife Pomi, an elderly father and his young child Nitai – all helpless and alone.

After the death of Muhiram, the bold steps taken by his wife Pomi have given a different momentum to the story of the play. Pomi is a very brave woman. She believes that it is better to live a life of subsistence by working hard, farming in the fields than to spend it in slavery. She tried to make Muhiram understand as much as she can that the people like the moneylender only needs money and if they get the money they don't care about other people like Muhiram. This is why she wanted Muhiram also to focus on farming. Muhiram did work hard for those two years and gave importance in taking care of his elderly father, wife Pami and son Nitai but not for long. It was not always possible for him to stay that way. Finally, ignoring Pomi's advices, Muhiram went back to catching elephants for his rich employer. This decision of his brought tragic consequences to his life. After Muhiram's death, Pomi did not give up but remained as a stronger force. Pomi even dares to insult the moneylender who came to pay a visit and help the family after hearing the news of the death. Muhiram and Pami's sone Nitai also chases the Mahajan with a stick. Thus the story of the play ends with a fierce protest against the exploiters like Mahajan.

Drama Characterization:

Characterization is one of the most important aspects for the success of a drama. Good character portrayal by playwright leads the play a step towards excellence. Munin Bhuyan has successfully portrayed all the characters in *Hati aru Fandi*. There are total eight characters in the play - Mahajan, Nathe, Muhiram, Lakshe, Burha, Nitai, Nande and Pomi. Mahajan, Muhiram and Pomi are the main characters in the play. The rest of the characters are taken as secondary characters with the help of whom the playwright has taken the story line forward.

1. Mahajan (Moneylender): One of the main characters in the play is Mahajan. The character of the moneylender is portrayed as an exemplary role of the exploiting class people in the society. The moneylender is selfish and hypocritical. He has persuaded to Muhiram catch elephants for him with his cunning tricks in the hope of making more profit in his trade. His cunning nature is portrayed in the play in his own words:

"Muhiram, Muhiram traps the elephants in the forest. And I, I am trying to trap Muhiram to work for me. Muhiram! Huh. I have tried all means to bring Muhiram to work for me and cunningly tricked him with greed and he is trapped now."

(P. 16, scene-9, Paraja)

After Muhiram was tricked into capturing the elephant in such a cunning manner, the Mahajan's elephant enclosure was filled with four elephants caught by Muhiram. But even then, the moneylender was not satisfied. He extended his permit for 15 more days and forced Muhiram in returning to the forest to catch more elephants. After Muhiram mentioned his domestic problems, he was threatened and sent to the forest despite his reluctance. Through such greedy, ruthless, inhuman behaviour of the character Mahajan, the playwright has specially exposed the reality presented by the exploiting class in general.

2. Muhiram: Muhiram represents the simple and hard working class of the society. He specializes in elephant catching. He also has an unconditional affection for elephants. Every year, Muhiram raises the capital of the elephant moneylender's business, but his own financial condition does not improve. After seeing this, his wife Pomi tried to make him understand and kept him away from his expertise for two years. But later on, due to financial difficulties, Muhiram goes back to elephant catching, tricked by the words of the moneylender. He loses his life because of the greedy nature of the moneylender.

The playwright, through the character of Muhiram, has brought to life a simple, honest and unpretentious man of the village who is responsible for the livelihood of his family. The playwright has put light to the reality of the working class people time and again being exploited by their rich employers.

3. Pomi: Pomi is the only female character in the play. This character is especially important for the drama. The playwright portrays this character as courageous, self-righteous, confident and, if necessary, rebellious. Pomi wants Muhiram to focus on farming instead of doing dangerous work like catching elephants for rich moneylenders. According to Pomi's advice, Muhiram stays away from elephant training for two years. Pomi tries to pacify her husband Muhiram, depressed by his financial conditions of that time in the following way:

"What are you saying? Earlier, my mother and I have spent many days starving. Anyway, people fast during Poornima and Amavasya. Just assume that we are fasting the days we are starving for food."

(P. 10, scene-7, Paraja)

Pomi, a firm believer in hard work tries to encourage Muhiram into farming in the following way:

"I do not understand why you tend to give up so easily. Why are you trying to reach for something that is not ours? This time try to farm vegetables. I have saved some money to buy the seeds. When the vegetables are grown take them to the market to sell and then you will get to go to the market every week."

(P. 10, Scene-7, Paraja)

However, unable to improve his financial situation with all his hard work, Muhiram goes back to elephant-catching. All the good advice given by Pami loses in front of the cunning words of the moneylender. As a result of the increasing greed of the moneylender, Muhiram had to lose his life being stomped by a wild elephant. Muhiram's death left Pomi, a pregnant woman, helpless with her son Nitai and the old father. However, she did not lose courage rather becomes stronger. Raged at her husband's death, she yells at his friends,

"You elephant catchers catch the wild elephants. You are the ones who lose your lives. But the money is taken away by someone else. And you people, you people continue doing this trade and die for your love for elephants instead for doing something for yourselves."

(P. 45, scene-26, Paraja)

Pomi understands the exploitative nature of the moneylenders. She knows that it is because of the moneylender Muhiram did not pay any heed to her advice and continued with the dangerous work. That is why she is enraged at the moneylender who has come to visit the family after Muhiram's death and shouts at him saying,

"This Devil. This bloodsucking chameleon! This is the man who is not satisfied after killing my husband by tricking him with his cunning words. Now, he has come to sympathize with us. This man has looted the poor people like us for his greed of money. Now he wants to heal our wounds with his money. We have spent all these years in poverty and will continue to do so in the future too. But I will never be a slave to a blood-sucker like him!"

(P. 47, Scene- 26, Paraja)

In this way, the character Pomi has been portrayed in a fiercely rebellious manner by which the playwright has brought the play to a dramatic turn. Through this exceptional character, the historical fact of a sudden revolt from the midst of exploited class is once again repeated.

In addition to the above mentioned protagonists, the other five characters have also been successfully portrayed by the playwright. All of these characters are representative of the oppressed masses. Nathe, Lakshye and Nande - these three characters also lead a life of slavery for moneylenders. They understand their plight but do not dare to protest. The character of the old man also belongs to the exploited class. Muhiram and Pomi's son Nitai's character has been portrayed by the playwright as a partially protestant character. Each of the characters has been carefully crafted by the playwright to contribute to the development of the plot of the drama.

Marxist ideology presented in the play *Hati aru Fandi*:

Munin Bhuyan is a socially conscious playwright. In each of his literary works he has presented a socially problematic situation. In this context, Nagen Saikia writes:

“Mr Bhuyan is a responsible playwright. This responsibility is reflected in three ways: responsibility to society, responsibility to the people and responsibility to the theatre. The responsibility towards drama and the rights towards drama have transformed Bhuyan’s plays into enjoyable dramas instead of turning them into slogans.”

This responsibility of the playwright has been very creatively portrayed in the play *Hati aru Fandi* too.

The main theme of the story of the play *Hati aru Fandi* indicates that it was influenced by Marxist philosophy. In practical terms, Marxism is the disagreement towards the exploitation and oppression of the bourgeoisie or the owners and the doctrine of liberation from slavery or servitude of the working class. The play also deals with the miserable lives of people like Muhiram, Nathe, Lakshye, etc. who were oppressed by Mahajan. Muhiram’s wife, Pami, on the other hand, has shown through her actions, thoughts and rebellious behaviour how the character of a fighter for self-determination can emerge from the midst of the exploited class at this time. Such class conflicts exist in all societies of the world even today. This eternal truth is dramatically presented by the playwright.

Conclusion:

Munin Bhuyan’s *Hati aru Fandi* is truly an exceptional play in the history of Assamese drama. The playwright’s skills in all aspects of the play’s content, story, character portrayal, dialogue are commendable. In addition to this, the play is also associated with folklores such as Hati Nichokuwa Geet, Hati Shikani Geet, Hati Chatuwa Geet, Bihu Geet or songs based on Elephant riders etc. which brings the play closer to the folk plays of those times. We believe that if we leave all these aforementioned excellent qualities of the play aside and shift our focus only to the humanity aspect of the play even then the play would remain as one of the distinguished plays in the history of Assamese drama and literature.

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